Schemes to support young people leaving care to remain at home when they reach 18: Summary

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Introduction

The aim of this report was to: *explore how When I'm Ready is operating in Wales as a compliment to the work of Voices from Care Cymru, and what can be learned from other similar schemes in the UK to support young people to remain in their homes after they turn 18.*

Methods

This policy review focused on 'When I'm Ready' scheme in Wales. As there is limited data available about 'When I'm Ready', the review used a range of methods to explore how the scheme is working in Wales. The review was carried out in four stages:

1. A literature review of peer reviewed and grey literature.
2. Comparison between When I'm Ready and schemes in Scotland, England and Northern Ireland highlighting key differences.
3. Consideration of metrics of successful outcomes
4. Stakeholder consultations sessions in Wales exploring the way When I'm Ready is operating, and ways that it could be approved.

Literature review

A search of the literature revealed that there is very little peer reviewed literature in this area. Key themes identified in the literature: the importance of pre-existing relationships, a lack of awareness of polices, finances for carers ad young people, the need support and training for carers and young people, the need to build towards transitions and manage endings, inconsistency of access for young people, and the need for a cultural shift to enable the wider implementation of policies.

Findings

In Wales "When I'm ready" arrangements were introduced across the country in April 2016. In England the "Staying Put" scheme was introduced in May 2014. In Scotland the "Continuing Care" scheme was introduced in April 2015. In Northern Ireland the "Going the Extra Mile (GEM)" scheme was introduced in 2006. Policies may be changed, replaced or updated over the next few years across the UK which may impact on the schemes.

Key differences

Implementation support

There is funding in some of the UK for the implementation of post-18 schemes, and not in others. In Wales, there has not been additional funding from the Welsh Government for the implementation of When I'm Ready. Whereas in England, Local Authorities have received grants to implement the scheme.

In England, the pilot of Staying Put (2008 – 2011) was accompanied by a funded evaluation (Munro et al. 2012) which led to implementation recommendations for other Local Authorities to follow when introducing the scheme. Similar evaluations were not carried out in Scotland, Northern Ireland or Wales.

Eligibility
Across the UK, young people are expected to leave the home when they turn 21, whereas in Wales they can remain until 25 if they are in education or training. This is likely to change in Scotland and England with the implementation of the findings from their care reviews.

Only in Scotland are residential and kinship care arrangements mentioned explicitly as being eligible for young people to remain in their home. In Wales, there is provision for a young person to move from a residential home into foster care and enter a When I'm Ready arrangement when they turn 18. In Northern Ireland, it is not clear which arrangements 'Going the Extra Mile' includes. In England, the 'Staying Close' scheme is being trialled to support young people to remain in contact with their residential home but not to remain living there.

Endings

The Welsh, Scottish and English guidance explicitly state that, if an arrangement breaks down but the young person and the carer are happy to begin it again, this should be an option. In Wales, there is a provision in the guidance that if the arrangement breaks down, there should be a 28-day cooling off period in which the carer and young person could repair the relationship and reinstate the arrangement. There are no restrictions on this happening after this point but 're-entry' is not covered in the guidance. In Scotland, there is no time limit, and there is an explicit statement that another Continuing Care arrangement could be sought if in the best interests of the young person. In England, the guidance indicates that while there is no right for the young person to return, if the young person and the carer want this, it is good practice to enable a return.

Data mapped against key indicators success

Based on the Welsh Government guidance, there are some key areas of practice that would indicate that implementation of the policy across Wales had occurred and key outcomes that could indicate success. However, there are limited data to draw from to evaluate implementation or outcomes. To date there has not been a review of When I'm Ready across Wales, and the data returned by Local Authorities in the Looked After Children Census covers limited areas of the scheme.

Delivery

The policy guidance in Wales gives clear indications of what should be happening to provide When I'm Ready arrangements. These are described in the full report, along with details on the extent to which we can currently understand (or not) how the policy is working in practice. In summary, data is not collected that would allow for an understanding of how When I'm Ready is working. The areas explored include: *Information; Planning; Support; Monitoring.*

Implementation and outcomes

When I'm Ready was implemented across all local authorities in Wales in 2016. However, each Local Authority has the flexibility to implement the policy under the guidance in a way that works best in their context.

Policies, procedures and guidance

The Code of Practice then includes a list of areas that should be covered in local policies. However, for this report it was not possible to access specific Local Authority policies in Wales regarding When I'm Ready. It is therefore not possible to consider to what extent the implementation of When I'm Ready across Local Authorities aligns with good practice guidance.

Uptake of schemes

"When I'm ready" arrangements were introduced across Wales in April 2016 and by 2021, 187 care leavers were in such an arrangement with their former foster carer (Statistics for Wales, 2021), 11% of young people who turned 18 and left care. In England in 2021 (60%) of young people in England leaving care while in a foster placement were staying with their former foster carer 3 months later. It is not possible in this report to calculate exactly what percentage of these young people were not eligible for Staying Put (i.e. in residential care). In Scotland in 2020, 229 young people who ceased to be classed as 'looked after' beyond the age of 16 entered a Continuing Care arrangement. A further 77 young people were identified as already being in such an arrangement, bringing the total number of young people were recorded as being in a Continuing care arrangement to 306 (Scottish Government, 2021). In Northern Ireland in 2018 22% of 16-18-year-olds leaving care and 29% of 19-year-olds were in a GEM placement (Department of Health, 2018). No up-to-date data about GEM uptake was located.

Statistics published vary significantly from country to country which makes it difficult to explore how When I'm Ready is operating in Wales compared with similar initiatives across the UK.

Variation in uptake in Wales

It would be useful to have the same data for all young people aged 18 eligible for When I'm Ready to explore further patterns in who enters the scheme and who does not – and further qualitative research to understand variations in uptake.

In addition, there is data publicly available that shows by Local Authority the number of young people who have ceased to be classed as 'looked after' at the age of 18 and who have entered When I'm Ready arrangements. It is unclear how many independent fostering agencies support When I'm Ready arrangements.

Consultation and discussion

In total, five consultation sessions were carried out including: two with care experienced young people, one with foster carers and two with practitioners. In addition, feedback was provided from an interview between a Voices from Care Cymru practitioner and a When I am Ready carer. Areas highlighted included: *Training and awareness; Relationships between carers and young people and practitioners and carers; A lack of support for carers, young people and practitioners; Differences between approach for kinship care and other forms of care arrangement; Uncertainty about finances, differences in payments and long waits; A lack of monitoring and transition planning; Issues with the use of language in When I'm Ready; Insufficient alternative options for young people who did not want When I'm Ready, or for when they were ready to move on.*

Recommendations

Despite the need for the scheme, this review highlighted that there are currently many 'unknowns' about how "When I am Ready" is operating for young people and their carers. However, a number of concerns were raised, and a range of recommendations are made here in relation to the findings of the review and consultation with young people, carers and practitioners.

Recommendations for policy

In line with the recommendations of the Fostering Network's State of the Nation report, this review highlights a need for a full review of the "When I am Ready" scheme and how it is operating across Wales. In addition:

- It is also possible that a policy, rather than guidance, that can be used across all Local Authorities, or regional groups of Local Authorities, could help to enable consistency in the use of When I am Ready. This could be developed in partnership with practitioners who have been working closely with "When I am Ready" and young people and carers who have experience of the arrangement.
- There is a need to consider how "When I am Ready" is integrated with other departments and policies, especially with the DWP and HMRC.
- It is also important to consider how "When I am Ready" integrates with new initiatives such as the Basic Income pilot and gather data on how these complement each other.

This report has highlighted the gaps in the current data which could illuminate how When I am Ready is operating. It is therefore important that a monitoring system is developed that could enable the operation of "When I am Ready" to be evaluated including collecting:

- Data to monitor the uptake of "When I am Ready", who is accessing it, how long the arrangement lasts.
- Data to monitor the outcomes for young people who enter "When I am Ready", compared with other accommodation options after no longer being 'looked after'.
- Data to monitor whether Independent Fostering Agencies are offering When I'm Ready and mechanisms to ensure that young people whose accommodation is provided by IFAs are given the same opportunity to enter "When I am Ready".

It would be useful if Local Authorities were provided with funding to:

- cover the fostering allowances paid and to ensure that there is no shortfall between the rate that carers receive for WIR and fostering.
- support with implementation of the scheme including training for carers, social workers and Personal Advisors.
- Create and resource a role for a "When I am Ready" practitioner in each Local Authority with responsibility for supporting the set-up of arrangements in, carrying out reviews and transition planning.
- Invest in more accommodation options for young people leaving care including
    - allowing young people to register for council housing waiting lists before they turn 18
    - commissioning of 'taster flats' for young people to have some experience of living alone while still in foster care.
    - support for private renting and shared ownership schemes.

As a guiding principle, transition from home on the best interests of the young person rather than eligibility criteria. However, to support this:

- Eligibility criteria should be reviewed to ensure equity for young people in care, including extending the scheme to all young people not depended on where they are living (i.e. extend to residential care) or whether they are in employment or education.
- Future guidance or policy should formalise and extend right to return for young people.

Recommendations for practice

It is possible that the culture around When I am Ready could influence whether and how it is offered to young people. It would be useful therefore if Local Authorities and Independent Fostering Associations could:

- Consider ways to develop a default of assuming When I'm Ready in conversations and planning with young people in the transition from being 'looked after'.
- Provide opportunities for practitioners working directly on When I am Ready to share good practice examples, for example by maintaining a practitioner forum.
- Change the language used around When I'm Ready to highlight benefits and loving relationships, rather than process.
- Create feedback mechanisms to hear from carers and young people about how "When I am Ready" is working for them – and address issues that arise.
- Encourage conversations about "When I am Ready" to begin 18 months before a young person turns 18 and return to the conversation consistency in any move on plan. If appropriate, begin this conversation first with the carer to ensure that any barriers to them offering this option can be overcome.

There was a need identified for training for staff and also foster carers. It is therefore important to:

- Co-develop training and resources about "When I am Ready" with practitioners, carers and care experienced young people.

Through this review, it was highlighted that data was not always accurate, and that data that was collected was not always used to reflect on how "When I am ready" was operating in Local Authorities. Therefore it is important that Local Authorities:

- Ensure that regular monitoring and reviewing is built into all "When I am Ready" arrangements.

Recommendations for research

A dearth of research was identified focused specifically on "When I am Ready". In particular, it would be useful to have more research exploring:

- Young people and carers views of "When I am Ready".
- Differences and discrepancies in who is providing and accessing "When I am Ready", including accessing data around ethnicity, asylum status, gender, sexuality, disability.
- Outcomes for young people from "When I am Ready" compared with other post-18 accommodation options.